

# The Scholar in Politics a Conservative

---

ADDRESS BY

## The Honorable Samuel W. McCall

Delivered before the Delta Chapter of  
Massachusetts, Phi Beta Kappa, June 16, 1903

---

Reprinted by permission from the Tufts College Graduate

THE TUFTS COLLEGE PRESS  
1903

~~LIBRARY~~ EXCHANGE.

MAR 13 1916

JK 1771  
M16  
copy 2

THE SCHOLAR IN POLITICS A  
CONSERVATIVE

---

The annual meetings of perhaps the most learned society in the republic of letters, and of kindred societies, are commonly marked by plain speech, and sometimes by radical speech, upon the scholar's special duty to the state and organized society. I remember that at my college, at the graduation of the class just before my own, a distinguished gentleman, who afterwards became the candidate of his party for Vice-President, presented the idea that it was the scholar's prime function in politics to oppose the established. An occasion like this invites, or possibly tempts, one to pass over platitudes which have delighted so often, and to present something novel, or at least striking. Sensationalism, however, has its dangers,—it is usually safer to be dull. You are not likely to explode dynamite under the foundations of social order, or to add to the active forces which may rend society asunder. I shall not undertake the hopeless task of trying to present to you anything new upon the peculiar relation of the scholar or educated man to the nation, but I shall speak to you of that relation in connection with certain tendencies that now seem to me especially calling for attention.

Let me say at the outset that I would by no means have the educated man enter life as though he were a member of a separate class. The fact that he has a liberal education gives him no warrant to govern his fellow men. He must divest himself of the notion, or if he does not the world will do it for him,

that he is a Heaven-sent being, commissioned to lead by any authority contained in his diploma. The college training will at the most raise only a presumption in his favor, for it is the glory of our democracy that a man is what the test shows him to be ; that he must prove his worth by actual doing ; and that he must produce the passport of his own fitness upon every highway. You will ordinarily be permitted to do the work you are fitted to do, and only that.

By the educated man I do not mean the college-trained man, merely. The presumption is that he is educated, but quite often we know that he is not. He may sometimes be too much educated in books and, losing the grasp upon practical affairs, his influence may swell the emotional forces which, if found in too great proportion, will form a most serious foe to the stability of the nation. On the other hand, some of the most splendidly educated men in our country's history, men especially trained for the greatest kind of work ever given man to do, have been those whose debt to the schools was of the most trifling character. They were endowed by nature with resplendent gifts. They were trained in the duties of everyday life, in the contests of the courts, and in bearing with seriousness the great public responsibilities that were cast upon them.

There is probably as little to be said for the proposition that a college education would have improved Lincoln and Washington as practical statesmen, as that it would have kept them from their great careers. They were marvelous men, and the times demanded just such products as they were, such a blending of great natural talents with the practical insight derived from the hardest knocks of life—knocks that would have brought even strong men to the ground, but were needed to make the most of these Titans. But it is not without force that one of these men took care to give his son a college education, and the other left by his will what at the time was a large fortune for the establishment of a university.

For my purpose to-day I mean by the scholar in politics one who by special training in our colleges, or outside of them, has become fitted to discharge in an ample manner the duty of the citizen. There is a demand for men who will study public questions closely, and not trust to a happy chance, or what is called destiny. We are so much absorbed in our private affairs—most of us in gaining a living, and some in getting rich—that we are apt to treat public problems only superficially, and to decide according to the most striking aspect of the moment. If we see a shocking instance of depravity we are apt, while the impression is new, to level all the batteries of legislation against that particular thing, unmindful that we may thereby threaten to overturn a great rampart of laws erected by centuries of labor and sacrifice for the protection of mankind.

You will recall a horrible deed of depravity that shocked the nation two years ago. For a moment it was seriously proposed to take away our most cherished political right, and a constitutional convention, sitting at that time in one of the historic states of the Union, voted to strike out of the constitution the right of free speech—a vote which, in a calmer moment, it rescinded. It would have uselessly taken away the right upon which the safety of our free government most effectually reposes,—indeed, would have made the very crime which it detested more likely to occur, by penning up beneath the surface the dangerous gases which might explode and overthrow society.

In despotic governments, which cherish the privileges of the few rather than the good of the many, the real scholar is usually radical. If he is honest he will likely incur ostracism or banishment in proclaiming the evils which he perceives. But in a democratic government, where there is substantial equality of political rights and where the State may be embarked upon perilous enterprises with little knowledge, I think the highest function of the scholar is to be conservative. He will preserve the liberty which exists by preventing hazardous and

doubtful experiments, and by preventing the excesses which are the common cause for superseding a democratic government by government of a more exclusive character. The American constitution is not exactly what Macaulay characterized it, "all sail and no anchor," but it so readily permits motion that a conservative force becomes vitally important.

The spirit of the ideal citizen under a government like ours will be what Stevenson calls the "hope-starred, full-blooded spirit," at once aggressive and sane, which shows its exuberance rather in preserving and building up than in smashing the existing order. Assuming that our system of government is the justest yet discovered, that better than any other it gives to each individual the opportunity of self-development, this spirit will occupy itself in preserving our democracy from the peculiar evils to which democracy is liable, and, for the sake of preserving it, will batter down the palpable abuses which threaten the system. Do not imagine that an easy task. It will require almost the ferocity of spirit of rare Ben Jonson when he said :—

“ With an armed and resolved hand,  
 I'll strip the ragged follies of my time,  
 Naked as at their birth. And with a whip of steel,  
 Print wounding lashes in their iron ribs.  
 I fear no mood, stampt in a private brow,  
 When I am pleased t' unmask a public vice.”

When I advise conservatism I mean conservatism with reference to our system, and not with reference to the statutes and laws which it may have called into being. Burke well said that enactment is more blessed than repeal. The American people are an inventive people, and many are the schemes they have brought forth to make men perfect by statute, until the freedom of which we boast has largely been taken away by ourselves. Some will ask what is the use of a government, unless

the evils that afflict society are cured by law. Men laudably ambitious to associate their names with the advancement of society try to write their particular scheme for human advancement upon the statute books. Believers in a paternal government, philanthropists, and self-seekers are constantly invoking, and often successfully, the action of our legislative machinery, until the individual is bound in fetters, and in attempting to conform to the artificial standards instead of those set up by nature he is apt to wonder if the object of government is to take away instead of to preserve liberty. More than once has our country as a whole, and have the states which compose it, had to pay roundly for their daring statutory experiments, and for putting their puny enactments against the laws of Nature.

When the minds of millions of men are working along the same lines upon any question, they reach conclusions easily. There is generated in the atmosphere something that will not tolerate counter arguments, but, after a time, when the popular enthusiasm disappears and the dry light returns again, you wonder that any such delusion could have been cherished. Here is the scope for the really great statesman in a government like ours—to hold the rudder true in spite of adverse popular winds, when even Palinurus could hardly keep the true course, and thus realize the best results of popular government by protecting the people from their first impulses and by giving them time to think.

To illustrate, take the conduct of General Grant when the marvelous business prosperity immediately following the Civil War began to be checked, and when the people attributed the prosperity which they had enjoyed to what was in part responsible for its decline—the inflation of our paper currency. Grant stood like a rock between the representatives of the people and a still further inflation. He braved unpopularity by doing so. He might have gained wide-spread approval by overturning the established order of finance, and by leading

instead of breasting the threatened financial revolution. History already recognizes the wisdom and greatness of his conduct.

When the popular imagination is excited, the thing it desires looks large, and it requires a cool head indeed to reduce the object to the proportions demanded by truth. It becomes a very trifling matter at such times to make, of the largest ocean in the world, an ocean ordained to be the great highway for all nations,—our own private fish pond. We can draw the most fabulous drafts upon our imagination for the wonderful trade that we are to get. Hundreds of millions of Chinamen are at once to go into the business of consuming our own particular brand of eye water, and there is an epithet ready at hand for the man who cannot see these wonderful visions through the enormous spectacles of the moment. If you do not draw your conclusions easily you will be called a pessimist, a not uncommon epithet for the man who does not wildly gallop in the chase after new schemes and new governmental enterprises; and the admiring crowd will, for the moment, turn to the statesman who serenely leads his country into the most menacing perils and at the same time fittingly inculcates the beauties of optimism. The easy assumption that a nation cannot commit a blunder is an effective method of convicting any doubter on this charge of pessimism. To my mind the true optimist is one who does not despair of the republic, and who does not despair of her because of his faith that, however wrong or misled she may at the moment be, she will ultimately shape her course according to the demands of truth and justice. Certainly, if optimism is mere indiscriminating approval of whatever the governmental agents of a nation happen to do, then I hope we shall never enthrone it here, however high it might deserve to rank among the Chinese virtues.

In the light of the very recent action of the political department of the government, now sustained by the Supreme Court by a majority of one, the same majority by which the English judges



decided against John Hampden, it would appear that our fathers rebelled against England and founded a government equipped to do the very thing against which their revolution was a protest, and that the nation which Lincoln freed from slavery may constitutionally hold their fellow men in chains, and govern them, subject to such restrictions only as are found in the goodness of our souls. Whether this is just or unjust, constitutional or unconstitutional, I shall not argue, but when this process is called giving subject communities freedom, I shall pause long enough to protest against the abasement of a noble word. He who holds his life, his liberty, and property at the mere caprice of another, is not a free man but a slave. Our boasted doctrine of self-government thus becomes merely a domestic or geographical doctrine, a doctrine peculiarly to be enjoyed by the American people, which they in turn are at entire liberty to deny to others. When our fathers declared that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, they meant governments established between certain latitudes in North America. In unselfishness the declaration, so construed, resembles what this same modern policy has made our Monroe Doctrine appear to be—a doctrine in which we satisfy our longings after justice by warning the over-crowded nations of the other hemisphere to keep their hands off our sparsely populated continent, while we ourselves leap across the Pacific and seize a thousand islands at a single stroke. If we shall not reverse what we have so recently done, it will hardly be said hereafter, if a unity is sought for in our national life, that American political doctrines are broad enough for all mankind, or that, according to American ideas, the principles of right and justice do not change with the skies that cover them.

You will, then, find it necessary sometime strongly to uphold those things in our government which have hitherto been regarded as axiomatic and fundamental. We have been declaiming about self-government for a century and a quarter, and we

find the doctrine not merely practically condemned by the action of our government, but theoretically condemned by the utterances of some of its leading citizens.

I shall not attempt to compare the merits of the American system with those of other systems. I attribute the marvelous progress of the last century of the world's history to the American Revolution more than to any other event. It ushered in the era of the people. It unshackled the most marvelous force upon this planet, the human intellect, and, by giving equal privileges to all, it set millions of minds in practical motion, and accomplished far more than systems of philosophers or the efforts of the few mainly absorbed in governing the many, and it sent the world spinning ahead upon its course a thousand years. By its direct influence upon the American people, and by the influence of its example in liberalizing the institutions of other nations, and in calling their genius into play, the American Revolution has proved itself of incalculable value to mankind. What has the emancipation of the intellect of the millions of mankind not accomplished? How marvelously it has magnified the powers with which nature endowed man! It has vastly extended the range of the human eye. It has expanded the compass of the human voice so that it may be heard even across mountains and under seas, or years after it sprang from the living lips. It has disseminated comfort, so that the mechanic of to-day is more luxuriously housed than the monarch of a century ago. Most of all, intelligence has been diffused, and if, by the sudden popularization of culture, we see very much of its cruder forms, we can see enough to make us believe that its coming is sure, and that its triumph will be genuine. We have witnessed that most permanent and noble sort of conquest, the peaceful and steady encroachment of American ideas and institutions, conquering the world.

I fancy you will not apply the epithet "little Americans," borrowed from the jingo vocabulary of Great Britain, to those

who would prefer to have America the beneficent sort of world power she has been rather than the conquering portent some would have her be. We speak of American freedom sometimes as if it were a mere commodity, to be transported across the sea like so much molasses in the hold of a ship, as if it were what Mr. Reed called "canned freedom." Perhaps the finest utterance I heard some weeks ago in this hall, in a really fine debate, was that we talked of endowing other peoples with American freedom and of lifting them up, as if the process were a mere surgical operation. Other communities need only the opportunity, to absorb as much of the spirit of our institutions as they are fitted to receive, and you cannot force them to assimilate more if you threaten them with annihilation.

You will not only be called upon to defend what we have regarded as fundamental and established ideas, but you will have the opportunity to exercise essential conservatism in combating transparent fallacies and prejudices.

To illustrate again, it is only a short time since we were urged to adopt an Anglo-Saxon alliance, whatever that may be, and whoever the Saxons are. With our heterogeneous population, and with the great mass of Celtic and other races in the British Empire, the Anglo-Saxon alliance was well termed by Dr. Goldwin Smith "an ethnological fancy," and yet we were told that what we called the Anglo-Saxons should unite to regulate the world and reclaim those parts of it under the domination of the so-called Latin races. I mention this simply as another popular delusion, which is now on the wane, but which threatened to do harm. I think even a Saxon, if you could find one, would admit that the world is somewhat in debt to the so-called Latin peoples, who have splendidly exhibited what Daudet calls "the gilded imagination of a sunlit race."

In those things in the world which survive,—in its masterpieces of poetry and prose, in the wonderful tints which it has

put upon canvas, in its speaking marbles, in its science, and in most of the things which lift man out of barbarism, the debt of mankind is quite as great to the so-called Latin races as it is to the race from which we claim to spring. Our own debt as a people is also peculiar. We owe to them the discovery of the continent upon which we live, and the establishment of the nation of which we are so proud. The architect of the universe, I suppose, would have had little difficulty in doing away with race variety, and would have made all peoples not merely of one blood, but have made them all Anglo-Saxon, if things would have been better. Race hatred is kindred with the war passion — that narrow chauvinism which would lead one to destroy all who are not members of his own clan.

We cannot complain if the standards we have set up for the judgment of the Latin should be applied to ourselves. You will remember that we were just now employing some large words of contempt concerning the Spaniards, and were indulging in furious declamation against certain practices of his, and yet, if we are fair, we shall admit that in adding another to the uniformly ghastly chapters of tropical colonization, whether written by Spaniard, or Frenchman, or Englishman, we have done some of the very things of which we accused Spain, only we give to our own action a very noble name. If we cannot attain the high beatitude of Voltaire, and pardon the virtues of our enemies, we should have a care against putting ourselves in a position where we are compelled to adopt his vices, and we should reflect that it is hardly an ideal way for preserving the character of a nation, to spare the national sins, or to bedeck national crimes with virtuous names.

A well recognized danger of democracies is seen in the tendency in public matters to appeal to the spectacular. Our rulers, or rather our governmental agents, — for we are our own rulers, — play to a very large house. Things must be set off in a grand manner. And this tendency, I think, leads especially

to the aggrandizement of the military spirit. In England, whose regular war establishment upon both land and sea is vastly larger than our own, it is rare that a soldier is found in the cabinet which is her real ruler, and you will have to go back nearly three-fourths of a century to find a soldier in the office of Prime Minister.

War and statesmanship are regarded as separate trades in that country, each demanding a special training; but here the rule is directly the opposite. It is an exception here to choose a man as President who has not been a soldier. The party managers appear to think there is something about a military hero attractive to the popular fancy, and when they could not find a great hero they have sometimes contented themselves with a little one. Possibly our party leaders are mistaken, and are not good stage managers. The party that has often been beaten since the Civil War won twice with the military hero entirely unrepresented on its ticket, and twice again it barely lost. We were happily situated to realize the dream of poets and exhibit the blessings of peace. We have not wholly thrown away the great advantage of our position by thrusting ourselves upon the other hemisphere, near to the point where the national collisions of the future threaten.

The age may come in the not distant future to which war will seem as horrible as cannibalism seems to our own day. I believe that America still has the great practical contribution of peace to add to its other gifts to mankind. You will find a worthy field for your effort in opposing wars of conquest carried on under whatever guise, and in urging the settlement of disputes between masses of men by the same peaceful arbitration that prevents them in their own private affairs from settling their differences with the rifle or the sword.

Those questions that are fundamental in our system are of the highest importance, and will receive your attention first. After them come the economic questions, which require the

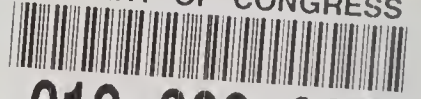
best thought of the most carefully trained minds. They are vital to the prosperity of the nation, and to the well-being of the individual citizen. We are pressing forward in our mad rush for wealth to have this generation "realize" upon the planet as an asset, and to absorb what was meant for the future as well as what was meant for us. Great deposits of ore and coal, which will sleep deep beneath the soil for centuries before being needed by man, are capitalized and put upon the stock market, and while they sleep the interest upon them becomes a living burden upon consumption and industry, and the largess of nature becomes a weight upon mankind. I think we are inviting the economic dangers which some highly civilized nations have avoided. The warfare between the employer and the employed is a warfare centuries old, but it was never so fiercely waged as now. Do not put too much faith in statutory cures, and cling to that primary right which has been established, or indeed nothing has come to us from the past, the right of a man to work!

Equip yourself for the fight as best you can, and then fight it in the spirit of a broad patriotism. Remember that it is the patriot's highest duty to be honest with his country. If he believes a given course will disgrace and dishonor her in the eye of history, then he is no true lover of hers if he does not bravely say so. Patriotism is a noble thing, but like other noble things—like religion itself—it is subject to abuse. Junius, in one of his private letters to Wilkes, said, "Let me recommend it to you to be much upon your guard against patriots." He obviously meant professional patriots—that type by no means yet extinct, the sincerity of whose love for their country is shown by their desire to own it. The true patriot will be sleepless to prevent his country from being ever a mere instrumentality for private ends. He will insist upon the rights of his country, and will also insist upon the sacred performance of her obligations. He will regard her flag as a symbol, not only

of her power, but also of her honor. He will demand that the vital principle of justice shall be enthroned in her treatment of other nations as well as in her treatment of her own citizens. He would have her so strong that the international freebooter, no matter how high placed, should fear her, and so just that the weakest of nations should love and trust her. He will be proud of her high institutions of learning, of her system of diffused public instruction, of her attainments in science, of the genius of her inventors, and of her conquests in literature and art. And as he would have her peerless among nations, her citizens prosperous, happy, and free, he will abhor from his soul that gallery patriotism which, if it shall prevail, will usher in the rule of sophomores, of pigmy heroes, and of inconsequential statesmen.

In dealing with the economic problems which lie so thickly about us ; in protecting individual freedom from the crude notions of the theorist and the ill considered action of society ; in keeping our democratic institutions pure, and inflexibly just to our own people, generous, and with no taint of oppression towards the feeblest of nations, you will find, I think, as noble and adequate a field for the strenuous life as in vaunting your own physical strength. And if you who go out from this college and from the other colleges this year, and who have gone out in the past, or who in other fields have won the capacity to think for the nation, shall keep up the fight and shall not "tune your voices to the time," never wavering in your allegiance to what is vital in our institutions, then the magnificent conception of the founders of the American Republic will be realized. We shall not be governed by mere opportunism, the ship of state will not shift her direction with every breeze that blows, but she will sail her appointed course, and safely carry with her her rich freightage of popular liberty.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 019 308 995 1